

Changing Trends of the U.S. Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Fishery

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ABSTRACT

The Northeast branch of the HMS Management Division is responsible for monitoring domestic BFT landings and sales, international BFT trade, and overseeing Atlantic tunas permit administration. These data monitoring and permit programs are critical to a complex management structure that includes FMP-prescribed quota allocations, closed areas, gear restrictions, incidental catch restrictions, size and retention limits, and fine scale regulation of seasonal and geographic subquotas. Data collected from these programs over the past decade are presented to illustrate significant changes in the U.S. BFT fishery, i.e., a decline in domestic commercial landings and revenues, a doubling of vessel permits (with the majority now recreational), and a trade switch for the United States from net exporter to net importer.

Despite a relatively stable ICCAT quota allocation ranging from approximately 1,300 mt in 1997 to 1,200 mt in 2007, domestic commercial fishery landings and associated revenues are dropping. Domestically, the fishery is experiencing a change in the temporal/spatial pattern of landings, a decline in average commercial fish size, and a change in the proportion of commercial to recreational landings.

From 1997 to 2007, the number of permit holders in the Atlantic tuna fisheries has doubled from approximately 17,000 to 33,500. Over this period, Charter/Headboat permits have more than doubled, and recreational permits account for nearly 75% of all permits (up from <50%).

Since implementation of the U.S. Bluefin Statistical Document program in 1992, international trade tracking has become increasingly complex, now requiring trader permits, re-export certificates, verification of Government validation authorities, and tracking of farmed fish. U.S. trade data show a steady decline in exports and a corresponding rise in imports with the U.S. balance of trade switching from a net exporter to importer in 2003. U.S. exports, destined mostly for Japan, have declined from approximately 90% to less than 50% of total domestic landings, illustrating a growing domestic U.S. market. Spain, Canada, and Mexico are currently the top three BFT exporters to the United States.